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Applying Systemic Project Management Approaches for the UK National Health Service¹

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Abstract

This paper sets out some observations arising from on-going research into the use of systemic methods in the planning of complex projects within the National Health Service (NHS) in Staffordshire and Shropshire in the UK.

This brief paper sets out the main reasons for the application of systemic approaches, the nature of the methodologies put in place and some of the outcomes and reflections of those involved in the various workshops.

Whilst not attempting to be definitive in our conclusions, the authors believe that the results of the application of systemic methods by Health and Care professionals show a range of strengths going forward.

Keywords:

Systemic, planning, project management.

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Contextual Background to the Study

The background to the study described in this paper is the modernisation of the health and social care workforces (numerously documented but see: McNulty and Ferlie 2002). More specifically, this paper arises from the experiences of the application of systemic approaches to workforce re-modelling following the establishment of the new role of Associate Director Workforce Development (ADWD) (Health and Social Care Integration) for the Shropshire and Staffordshire Workforce Development Confederation. The post was funded by the NHS but the host employer was one of the four Local Authority Social Services Departments within the boundaries of the Shropshire and Staffordshire Strategic Health Authority. The paper sets out practitioner and client notes on the selection and use of systemic methods applied to assist care professionals meet their evolving needs to manage complexity in their working environment. In this paper the reflections of the commissioning client and the main consultant/ researcher are included, both in order to provide an accurate account of the training/ induction process for systems methods, and also as a means to provide the reader with a sense of the practical issues which arise from such situations.

The care workforce is in a climate of continuous change, invoking wide scale rethinking on almost all aspects of its use and development (for a comprehensive discussion of key issues see: Davies 2003). The NHS workforce for the Staffordshire and Shropshire area (the focus of this paper) is 35,000 and the social care workforce is estimated to be nearly as great but largely employed outside the Social Services Departments. Rather, it is supplied by hundreds of different private and charitable business employers (these organisations face their own, related challenges, see: Harris, Cairns et al. 2004). The ADWD post was expected to work at the interface between the NHS and the social care sector on workforce development issues.

Shropshire and Staffordshire Workforce Development Confederation was established in April 2001 to take forward local strategies in support of the national plan for modernisation of the health and social care workforce. Its formation was part of the NHS restructuring of Regional Authorities which devolved budgets and commissioning power to these confederations across the country. In 2004 the

Workforce Development Confederations in England were integrated into each of the 28 Strategic Health Authorities adding another dimension to the latter's performance management role which had been constantly expanding since they had been brought into being in 2002.

In the Shropshire and Staffordshire area this meant that the Confederation was now to become the Workforce Development Directorate (or WDD) of the Shropshire and Staffordshire Strategic Health Authority alongside Directorates for Service Improvement, Health Strategy, and Performance and Finance. The WDD was tasked with ensuring the local implementation of national policy. Further, and developing from this role, there is an expectation that the WDD is also performance managing Human Resource (HR) improvement aspects of the work of the Health Trusts in line with Department of Health (DoH) requirements. This is alongside the continuing multi-million pound commissioning role for university provision of health professional programmes and funding of secondment to these.

Problem issues abound for the WDD to manage. Problems of data shortage on vital teams within the NHS are well documented (see, for example: Stubbings and Scott 200; Editorial 2004), the development of decentralised teams working at local level seems patchy at best (Deeming 2004), and leadership training and effectiveness remains critical (e.g. see: Hewison and Griffiths 2004; Kristina 2004), yet the goal of flexible workforces, responding to need flexible and autonomous ways remains the philosophers stone (For a wider discussion on this see: Huselid, Becker et al. 2005)

In the case of Staffordshire and Shropshire, the WDD had a specific need in the development of capacity in the use of a range of management techniques. The advertisement for the post of ADWD implies as much:

“you will play a key role in modernising service delivery through the effective integration of social care and health workforce development strategies, initiatives and processes. The task is both enormous and multi-faceted. What we're working to achieve is not only an understanding of functional processes and the skills demonstrated by the current workforce to deliver services, but a specification of the skill sets required to deliver evolving, emerging and future service models.”

(Guardian newspaper, June 2001)

The need for the application of systemic processes and methods in the further development of the WDD remit was also clear:

“In describing you as the Social Care guru in the WDC, we need to make one point absolutely clear: this is not the time or place for professional advocacy. The whole point is to get away from old pitfalls - demarcation, adversarial budgeting, territorial thinking – and build on the essential elements in the make up of multi-skilled teams”
This systemic quality is further emphasised in following sections, including:

“To take forward the integration of modernisation of the Health and Social Care workforce through the development of integrated workforce planning and development between the NHS and Social Care; scoping the potential for reducing demarcation, changing working practices and roles and initiating projects to produce change; initiating joint reforms in health and social care education and development at pre and post qualification levels.”

(Guardian newspaper, June 2001)

Following her appointment, the remit for multi-skilled teams initiating projects, avoiding old demarcations and adversarial/ territorial thinking was recognised by Ann as demonstrating an implicit need for systemic processes. Such processes impose responsibilities and rigours on the organisation. As Charlotte Roberts and Jennifer Kemeny have argued:

"You can't redesign your system .. by dividing it into parts; everyone must look at the whole together. Thus you can't practice systems thinking as an individual - not because the discipline itself is difficult, but because good results in a complex system depend on bringing in as many perspectives as possible. As you put together a team, make sure all necessary functions are represented, and gain clearance from top management to propose cross-functional solutions, regardless of sensitivities and politics"

(Senge, Ross et al. 1994 pages 91 - 92)



Figure 1. Members of the WDD using Soft Systems Methodology

Approaching the Systemic Intervention

On appointment, Ann reflected on the progress being made towards team building goals. In an early reflective email to a colleague she said:

“It is vital to have vision and big picture thinking ability; promoting a whole systems approach while breaking down the steps to change into something manageable and not too threatening.”

(Private email from ADWD to a colleague in the WDD)

In a separate email Ann developed her thinking as follows:

"I said that I thought my workplan would mean being a programme manager for a range of projects where I would bring stakeholders together and be a catalyst for them to achieve something that they were wanting to do but didn't know how. Two years later that is exactly what I have been doing."

(Private email from ADWD to a colleague in the WDD)

In order to provide such a catalyst, Ann approached Simon, to develop a structured, systemic intervention in the form of training need support and private mentoring. At this time the needs of the WDD were clearly stated to be focused on six key items in the terms of engagement:

1. A series of training events on systemic approaches to project scoping, planning and management.
2. Actual project work to be used as the basis for all training
3. A Team based approach to be applied to all training
4. The workshop process to be completed 1st October 2003.
5. That there be a tailored half day for the Executive team.
6. That on-going support via email be provided.

The nature of the approach to be adopted had been agreed to be systemic, participatory methods. Ann had gained some first hand experience of systemic/participative approaches at a range of workshops run in London and Rugby and was convinced that they could meet the needs of Professionals in Staffordshire and Shropshire. In her own words:

"To be able to advise on the scope for integrated workforce planning and development and the methods by which that may be achieved could itself only be achieved through wide consultation with stakeholders. Harvesting these stakeholders' ideas whilst gaining an understanding of their opinions, their perspectives and their assumptions would be an important task en route".

The main requirement from the WDD was to provide Health and Care Professionals with transferable skills to aid in the planning, management and development of projects across the region. It was judged that systemic methods, focused on problem solving, would be most likely to meet this need. Again, in Ann's words:

"To be able to advise on reforms in working practices and on new roles which may be achievable and provide up to date intelligence on key workforce issues in health and social care I would need to create the kind of mini-environments that would enable me to qualitatively research through using "participative inquiry" and health and care pathway and process analysis a shared understanding with those involved across differing cultures of the current working practices and roles being applied by the NHS and Social Care organisations"

It had further been agreed between Ann and Simon that all training involve real projects in the pipeline. This would help to concentrate participants minds and

provide an acid test for the methods - they would need to be seen to be delivering real results during the learning process.

Teams were engaged in the work. Again this was intended to allow cooperating colleagues to learn common methods and provide strength in depth to on-going use of the methods. No one person should be seen as being the team 'expert', all should contribute and participate. Ann notes on this point:

"The notion of "releasing" ideas about the transformations needed and the way to achieve them to bring about the required modernisation from different people in all parts of the affected workforce has been very motivating".

The original completion date was September 2003. This was subsequently shifted to October and then later to early 2004.

The executive team would also be introduced to the method. This was a crucial plus for the research as it meant that the WDD would gain understanding of the methods across the organisational hierarchy. This is rare in the experience of the authors and the lack of such senior buy-in often means that initiatives lack senior champions later in the process.

Finally, it was agreed that the process would be supported by email and phone support during the project run-time. This would mean that professionals working on specific, complex issues could have access to support in the development of their proposals.

Methodologies applied

The Systems Department at the Open University has been teaching and researching with systemic approaches for over three decades. Although approaches have changed and developed over time, one main methodology, applied across undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, has been Soft Systems Methodology or SSM. This approach - first advocated and subsequently developed by Checkland et al (Checkland 1981; Checkland and Scholes 1990; Checkland 1994; Checkland 2001) has been included in Open University courses and developed into a distance learning format (Open University 1987; Open University 2000). There has been much discussion about the use of SSM (Stowell, Holland et al. 1990; Haynes 1995; Jayaratna 1997; Probert 1998; Flood 2001; Holwell 2001) and it has been applied in a wide variety of contexts

- most recently the main author's have turned to the complex field of information systems (Checkland and Holwell 1998).

SSM has a range of strengths to advocate its use in the development of project planning and can be seen as an aid to other systemic approaches in encouraging imaginative problem solving (see for example: Brookfield 1991; Issacs 1999; Wenger 1999). From the perspective of the present authors these can be listed as:

1. a capacity to make use of SSM at a very basic level very quickly - it can be adopted rapidly
2. SSM can be applied in such a way as to provide three outcomes essential for a project: a rich picture of what is, a root definition of what could be and an activity plan or conceptual model of how to get there.
3. SSM is best used in a participatory manner by mixed teams of stakeholders.
4. SSM is a problem solving approach, it is designed to focus on the kinds of soft, intangible problems which beset organisations like the UK NHS
5. SSM links well as the front end to more formal methods. This allows user groups to begin their planning with SSM and then move on to more formal techniques.

All of these factors keyed in well with the requirements of the WDD as set out in the terms of engagement - most specifically for project scoping and early planning.

In further developing the project plan, and taking it up to implementation, monitoring and evaluation, the Logical Framework Approach or LFA has been applied in a variety of contexts (Coleman 1987; Bell 1998; Baccarini 1999; Kumar and Corbridge 2002; Biggs and Smith 2003; Crawford 2003; Crawford 2003; Dale 2003) and, as with SSM, has found its way into Open University Systems teaching (Open University 1997; Open University 2000; Open University 2004). LFA involves the development of a four by four matrix, containing the main story or the project (the narrative summary), the main assumptions or risks (a key item - often noted as being absent or under-represented in project planning (British Computer Society and Royal Academy of Engineering 2004)) and the means of measuring success in terms of performance, impact, sustainability and strategy – see Table 1. The LFA can provide a systemic, if highly structured, means to capture the outcomes of SSM.

Table 1. The Logical Framework

Narrative summary column	Verifiable indicators	Means of verification	Assumptions or risks
The Goal of the purposeful human activity. Always beyond the project purpose. Aspirational	The goal is measured by qualitative and quantitative strategic indicators or ST Is	Indicators can be measured in by data or by means of focus group/ questionnaire	The risks that would mean that the goal was unachievable
The purpose of the purposeful activity: including details of beneficiaries, implementers, transformation, assumption, owners and constraints	The purpose is measured by qualitative and quantitative sustainability indicators or SIs	Indicators can be measured in by data or by means of focus group/ questionnaire	The risks and assumptions that would render the goal unrealisable or unachievable even if this purpose was achieved
The outputs of the purposeful activity:	Output is measured – usually quantitatively – by impact indicators - IIs	Indicators are usually measured by data or questionnaire	The risks and assumptions that would render the purpose unrealisable or unachievable even if these outputs were achieved
The key activities for the purposeful activity	Activity is measured quantitatively by performance indicators – PIs	Indicators are measured by data or questionnaire	The risks and assumptions that would render the outputs unrealisable or unachievable even if these activities were successful

In an earlier paper Bell applied this - specifically as a means to explore the outcomes of SSM analysis (Bell 2000). Although it is not without numerous critics - and it can certainly be applied in a non-participatory and top-down manner (Gasper 1997; Gasper 2000), it remains a commonly used method in many difficult and complex contexts. Key to the virtues of LFA are:

1. It can be applied in context and rapidly
2. It lends itself to participatory workshops
3. It can be revised readily
4. it does not require software or IT solutions.

5. it links in to other, even more formal project planning methods if necessary. Again, these five factors all have resonances with the needs of the Directorate.

Research Question, Workshops outcomes and participant reflections

In May 2003 Ann took a proposal in the form of a discussion paper to the WDD Executive team meeting. They had already approved an experimental day with some members of the team and Simon Bell to explore the possibilities of the methodologies he could introduce. A key question was, could systemic tools and techniques effectively develop the various work streams of the WDD?

A recently completed review of the Confederation's Organisational Structure and Processes had recommended that it needed to build up its project management approach. Ann's paper proposed adopting the use of the Logical Framework model for project planning and agreeing other suitable systems for scoping, monitoring, reviewing and reporting on all of the project based work being undertaken.

On Ann's agenda was the plan to help facilitate these developments for the work which other members of the Confederation team were responsible for while at the same time helping to ensure that social care and health interface issues were prioritised for urgent development using these methods.

So, at the instigation of the WDD, a training package for project planning and development was put together which was based upon user-focused variations of SSM and LFA. Over a period of eleven months - from April 2003 - May 2004 more than a dozen training events took place.

Most of the events were either focused on SSM or LFA or, if time allowed - made use of both. The user need was paramount and if certain teams needed help with scoping their specific project, as opposed to planning the detail, then elements of SSM would be applied. It was also notable that, as time progressed, teams began making use of key elements of either methodology, out of sequence, if they thought it would be valuable to them.

Following the workshops a random sample of Participants was asked to comment on the value of the various aspects applied. Concerning the overall use of SSM:

Wayne Coombe, Head of Human Resources, Staffordshire Social Care and Health made the following observations:

"My experience of Logframe/Soft Systems to date has been very positive ...I have found it a useful (yet ultimately simple) technique for pulling together groups of individuals from different organisations (or sub sections of the same organisation). I find that it helps groups who sometimes have significantly contradicting or differing views to reach a consensus on a way forward, yet without any one group or any individual dominating and imposing their own objectives and the experience of others."



Figure 2. A rich picture of the workforce planning scenario

Colin Harriden, a Social Care Workforce Planner, speaking about a workshop for Raising the profile of Workforce Planning in Social Care said that systemic methods: "Enabled a group of senior HR managers in Social Services to work against their relative disempowerment and devise a strategy to promote HR and workforce planning at all levels. *The first planned outcome is an event for directorate/CEO level to get workforce planning on the agenda and identify champions.*"

When Colin was involved in the use of soft systems with another team he observed:

"The soft systems model enabled a large and diverse group of managers to collaborate in developing common themes and purpose."

Colin also made use of Logical Frameworks. He says:

"Log frame created focused energy - identifying key players assumptions and barriers to be addressed. Statement seemed broad but led to specific focus."

But when working with another team with LFA he observed the problem of handing on previous work to a new group: He noted:

"Learning disability workforce strategy - difficult to use an existing log-frame with a new group. . participants need to own the development of the purpose and other elements. Side-step to key tasks and barriers helped to re-engage.

Generally - the longer you have the more focus and progress towards achievement."



Figure 3. Developing a rich picture

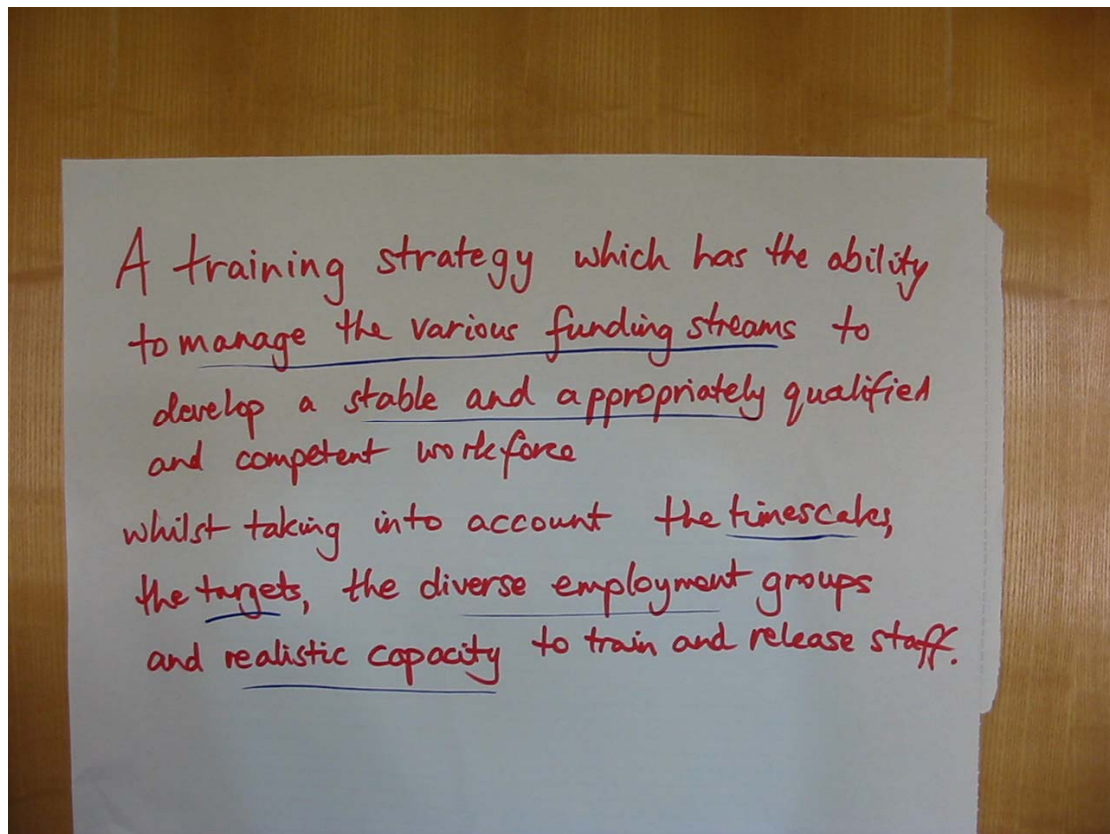


Figure 4. An early root definition for training strategy

Positive comments came from most participants, but critical issues remained. For example, Fiona Shield, Changing Working Practice Coordinator noted some good outcomes from her work

"I have persevered with the logframe and found it useful.

.... we ended up with 3 versions - 1 per health economy. Although the groups were small each logframe had its own 'flavour', which we felt was very important in terms of reflecting local ownership and culture. When I informed the SHA Trust Directors of Modernisation about this work they asked if I could produce one framework for the whole patch. I did this by informal thematic analysis ... and kept it to the Purpose and Outputs with indicators (attached)."

However, Fiona had some pithy comments about the use of systemic methods - most specifically Logical Framework in her case:

"I keep asking the Trust CWP leads if they are happy with the Logframe and can't honestly say that they really understand or utilise it. BUT I find it a very useful working tool to refer back to periodically. I think the main problem is that it quickly becomes out of date in terms of the specific outputs and indicators. I could keep

updating it, but then it would lose the ownership of the wider team. However the 1 side of A4 attached is quite an impressive document to circulate when people ask what I do and what CWP is about!! We also use it within the team of CWP facilitators to help check the direction of current work."

More recently, Fiona has added that, the outcome she was looking for was for the work of the role re-designers to become embedded within the work of the Trusts. But how to evaluate if this has been happening and if so if it was the work of her team that has made it happen? What she can prove is that she had measures in place as part of the project plan. The Logframe was the work plan and seemed to provide a very good framework to measure themselves against. Revisiting the Logframe as an evaluation exercise and using it as a review tool has given a recent added value for Fiona and her team for all the work that went into producing it. They can see where they've come from. As she says:

"We can step back and say: we had something to do and we got on with it".

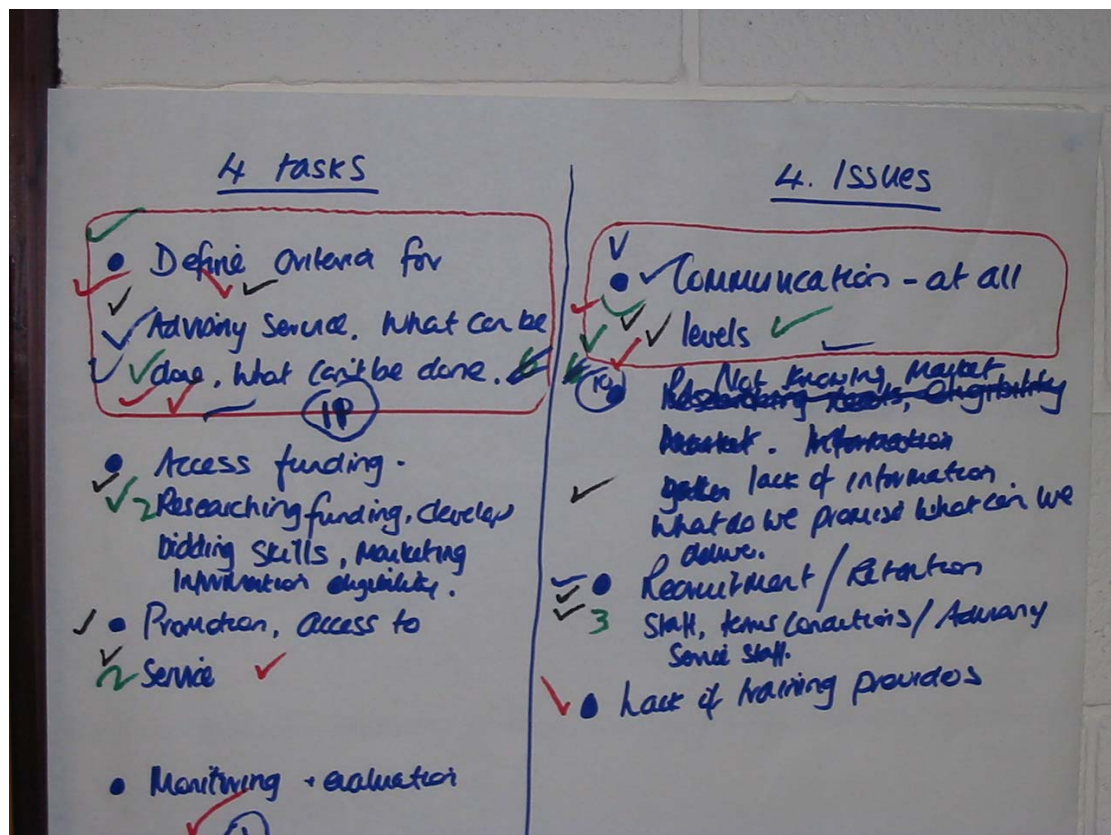


Figure 5. Tasks and issues arising from a rich picture exercise

Lynne Lewis, NVQ/Learning Account Manager applied Logical Framework approach to her project: Moving Forward Together For People With Learning Disability

Lynne comments on the process as follows:

"I have used the process of Logical Frameworks for a project to assist with the Skills Escalator approach within Learning Disabilities. The process of logical framework has assisted with a systematic approach to achieving a goal. It breaks down tasks into bite sized processes, with clear progression to the ultimate goal. The difference from my own personal point of view with this process compared to the average action plan, is the thought process behind the bite sized processes. Thought of what could happen, and what effect this has on the overall process. An ordinary action plan will inform who does what by when, but does not inform of the contingency plans. My own style of learning was assisted by having the dedicated tutor working through the logical framework step by step, with a dedicated group, for a common goal. I found a previous session of logical frameworks with a very large group less effective.



Figure 6. An activity plan

Jane Rook, (Podiatry Continuous Professional Development), who was lead for the WDD and was project managing the development of an agreed system in Shropshire and Staffordshire for re-registration of Podiatrists with the Health Professional Council observed:

"There is something about having the actual flip chart paper to work from and the post it notes that makes the log frame real and living. I have preferred to have these big and creative bits of paper on the wall to work from and the rich picture to work from in terms of further working out how to tackle the unsaid issues.

We are almost at the end of the project and the log frame was a timely reminder as we went along of how to plan to achieve specific targets and to keep me on target.

Very encouraging to tick off the boxes as I went along .

I did write the document up properly but have used this version only to send out to prove that I do have a project plan to work to. I think it was a definite focus for the steering group to work to as well They have appreciated that the wider Authority works to this planning process and felt more corporate as a result.

All in all it was probably a lot easier than some of the project plans based on Microsoft and Prince systems. Probably appealed to my need for visual clues for my learning style"

In private communication Jane has indicated that she would have liked to have used the methodology with the Steering Group right at the beginning of her planning process but even half way through it was worth doing and proved valuable. Two major benefits included:

- it enabled the mixed range of different kinds of managers with a diverse understanding of project management (Prinz, Microsoft etc.) to share one approach and secondly
- it enabled really meaningful conversations with all voices being valued as to what the project was about and whether or not everyone shared the same vision. .

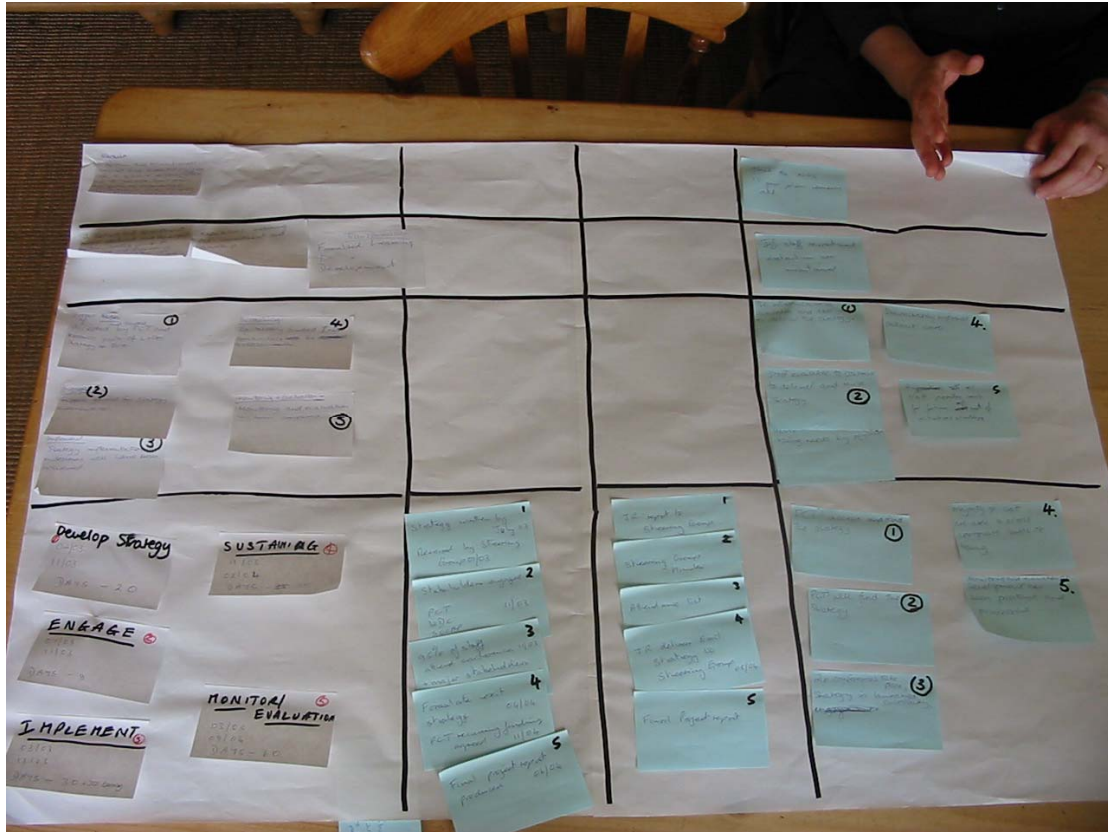


Figure 7. A Logical Framework under development

Ann, as commissioning officer for the workshops observed:

"The dimension that has emerged as so powerful for me in this research is the quality of the learning that has been going on in the workshops as groups of colleagues discussed the elements of their project in order to agree the plan."

Author Reflections and Conclusions

As already stated, the authors are not making definitive claims for the WDD experience but, recalling our initial research question: "could systemic tools and techniques effectively develop the various work streams of the WDD?", from the comments of participants, and the experiences of the authors some modest claims, seeking further testing, can be suggested:

1. The use of systemic and participatory techniques was greeted by most of those on the workshops as a relief and a change from their previous experiences of such events.

2. SSM provided teams with the basis to think widely and divergently about their work context and gave them the 'slack' to think differently
3. Most of those involved in teams which they worked with regularly, found the experience helpful to the deeper understanding of the tasks which they had been allocated.
4. Those who worked in unfamiliar teams found the brainstorming and sharing involved helpful in their wider understanding of the work of the SSWDD
5. LFA was seen as being a readily applicable tool for project planning.

If these are the positive reflections, some more negative outcomes were:

1. Small teams seemed to get more from the process than large
2. The work of one team was not readily understandable or usable to another
3. The sustainability of the process is a key point. Without renewal and continued investment in support - some of the good outcomes of the process could dilute over time.

In summary, it appears to the authors that some important foundations have been built for essential collaboration to deliver workforce solutions to the challenging task of trying to achieve integrated services in the Staffordshire and Shropshire areas. Most critically, an awareness of the importance of a methodical approach to planning major new initiatives has been raised.

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